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RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1444
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6194
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2516
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RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 000097

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SUBJECT: SUPPORT FOR AQIM MAKES ALI BENHADJ ONCE AGAIN A
POLITICAL HOT POTATO

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires, a.i. Thomas F. Daughton;
reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Ali Benhadj, the former leader of the outlawed Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), has lent his name and support to the recruiting efforts of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM).

Contacts tell us that the government views Benhadj as a threat to its anti-AQIM efforts, but believes putting him back in prison would be too dangerous due to the widespread popular support he still enjoys. The well-informed editor of the Arabic-language Ennahar newspaper, Mohamed al-Moqadam (strictly protect), told the Ambassador on January 23 that Benhadj is inciting young Algerians to join AQIM through his speeches and statements. Moqadam and Souad Azouz, a journalist at Ennahar, were adamant that Benhadj remains influential on the Algerian scene.

CELLBLOCK MUSINGS

12. (C) Moqadam gave us a copy of Benhadj's book entitled, "Separate Conversations on the Injustice of Rulers," which Benhadj wrote while in jail in 1992. The book is widely circulated on Jihadi websites and can be easily downloaded from official Al-Qaeda website, al-hesbah (www.al-hesbah.com). Its 300 pages are divided into chapters focusing on Islamic issues ranging from how to bring an Islamic state to power to resisting Western countries. Benhadj's book is dedicated to "all those who carry the Qur'an in one hand and a machine gun in the other." According to Benhadj, it is the duty of every Algerian whose rights have been violated to fight the current regime, which he says is manipulated by the military. Benhadj asserts that if he were not "behind prison walls I would be with my mujahideen brothers fighting this regime until all the Algerian Muslim people are free to choose their own leaders." Admitting that his words will cost him dearly in the future, Benhadj closes the book with, "I do not care about killing a Muslim, no matter which side he is aligned with, as my death is for God." (Comment: AQIM uses a similar theme in their communiques. End Comment.)

13. (C) Ennahar reporter Souad Azouz (strictly protect) described Ali Benhadj as a "fahel" (Arabic for "stallion"). Benhadj, according to Azouz, is still very popular and highly respected among both young and old Algerians because of his consistent stance against the Algerian government. She told us January 23 that Benhadj's aggressive rhetoric gives

Algerians hope that someone is strong enough to stand up and speak about their pain and suffering. When asked why the Algerian government doesn't arrest Benhadj, Moqadam said it is afraid that doing so would cause civil unrest to break out. (Note: Benhadj reportedly gives speeches in mosques and at other public gatherings despite being banned from doing so under his current legal status. End note.)

STILL POPULAR

¶4. (C) Both journalists observed that the government has not articulated a vision that people in Algeria can understand. Nor has any political party done so, they claimed. Instead, they opined, only two people appear to have a vision Algerians can hold onto. One is Louisa Hanoune, the head of the Trotskyist Workers' Party; the other is Ali Benhadj. (Comment: It's noteworthy that Hanoune and Benhadj also happen to be two of the most articulate and effective stump speakers in the country, interspersing Algerian Arabic into their remarks for an extra touch of populism. End Comment.)

¶5. (C) COMMENT: Ali Benhadj's 19-year-old youngest son, Abd al-Qahar, joined AQIM's ranks in April 2007. According to Moqadam, Abd al-Qahar was recently promoted to assist Abu Salah (the AQIM Media Committee director) because of his knowledge of computers and internet use. He was allegedly recruited at the Al-Fatih mosque in Algiers, the same mosque his father attends. In a recruitment video message posted on AQIM's website on June 21, AQIM clearly seeks to exploit the popularity of Ali Benhadj by making good use of the son as a propaganda tool. Benhadj the father frequently releases statements to the Arabic media, and still gets plenty of

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attention and support. On September 11, 2007, Benhadj was briefly arrested after criticizing the late General Smain Lamari, number two in the intelligence service. Benhadj was quickly released, however, either in keeping with President Bouteflika's national reconciliation policy or out of fear that his captivity would destabilize the population.
DAUGHTON